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# Review of "The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball" by T.F. Carter

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contemporary Cuba and as an excellent core reader for any course on the same topic.

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STEPHEN WILKINSON

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Thomas F. Carter, *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics, and Language of Cuban Baseball* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. xvi + 239, £50.00, £12.99 pb.

For baseball fans, it is a treat to watch the game in Cuba. Carter's book, *The Quality of Home Runs*, provides some insight into why. It addresses the particular attributes of the fans and the unusual role they play in the live experience of the game. With a keen eye to the intricacies of the sport as well as Cuban culture, history and politics, Carter, an ethnographer, examines what is Cuban about Cuban baseball, and how and why Cubans experience baseball the way they do. He treats baseball as a lens through which to view Cuban identity, attempting to explain how baseball in Cuba serves to shape the Cuban identity, which in turn embodies political, historical, cultural and religious factors, and, conversely, how this identity influences the Cuban experience of baseball. While the book is enjoyable for its portrayal of the sport in Cuba, the overall goal of drawing on the example of baseball to provide insight into Cuban identity falls short.

The strength of Carter's book is found in those passages and chapters that stick more closely to baseball per se; these clearly reveal Carter as a keen observer (and lover) of the sport and the setting in which it takes place. His book presents interesting stories describing the dynamics between play on the field and the performance and behaviour of spectators. We read about the groups of fans that entertain and provide commentary on games. These groups act like a Greek chorus, and are integral to how the game is experienced and interpreted. Moreover, as Carter tells us, this chorus is not without contention over which group among the spectators constitutes the chorus, and what the message of the chorus should be.

While Carter shines as an entertaining storyteller, he comes up short as an academic commentator. His evidence is drawn largely from his experiences attending games, primarily in Havana at the Estadio Latinoamericano, where he sits with a group of true fanatics collectively called *El Círculo*. The North American parallel is probably sitting in the bleachers at Yankee stadium. While the behaviour, commentary and antics of the members of this group may be interesting, one wants to know how generalisable their experiences are. How much can we really say about Cuba from the interpretations, behaviour and actions of this group? What about fans who sit elsewhere and are not part of *El Círculo*, or who watch baseball at home, or who only read the box score the next day? Are their experiences, the judgments they make and the emotions they feel really all that different from those experienced by baseball fans in North America? Certainly, the bland 'games' in which we North American fans participate between innings thanks to massive video screens create a different experience than does watching an impromptu skit on the dugout roof deriding a player's error or a manager's decision. But are these differences best explained by something Cuban, something cultural – or merely by differences in income?

The underlying question of how different Cuban baseball really is arises with Carter's discussion of the event that seemingly gave rise to the book's title.

Two teams are vying for a spot in Cuba's Youth National Championship. A play occurs wherein a batter severely injures the third baseman in his attempt to turn a double into a triple. Subsequent to this, a teammate of the offending player comes up to bat in a situation that should call for the revenge act of intentionally hitting the player – yet given the stakes of the game and the score, doing so would come at a significant strategic loss. Carter successfully builds tension with each pitch and reports the commentary from the crowd as the pitcher and batter engage in a game of cat and mouse, each trying to second-guess the strategy of the other. In the end, the batter hits a three-run home run, a hit that (we are led to believe) winds up winning his team the game. Carter's subsequent analysis of this story, wherein he segues to the way in which 'quality' and 'struggle' are defined in Cuban baseball, seems at odds with the event: would not all baseball fans, regardless of culture, react to this incident similarly? Would not the drama, the 'quality' of that hit and this game, and the interpretations of the various players' actions, be similarly interpreted and debated outside of Cuba? By failing to provide any comparative context, it is hard to know if what Carter says is Cuban about Cuban baseball is really Cuban at all.

An additional shortcoming is that the book's language is frequently dense and opaque and makes too little effort to communicate to those not steeped in a certain academic jargon. For example, in introducing his book, Carter writes: 'Throughout *The Quality of Home Runs*, a variety of positions are taken in order to elicit greater analytic depth of Cubans' senses of themselves even as forces beyond their direct experience or control increasingly affect their localized experiences' (p. 3). Several pages later when developing a theoretical backdrop of identity politics, he writes: 'It is through the disjunctive interplay of commerce, media, and national politics that identity, once a genie contained in the spatial bottle of locality, has now become a global force forever slipping in, between, and through Aladdin's lamp. These artificial encapsulations simply did not and do not reflect the ambiguous intangibility of identities' locations, for like the locations of cultures ... they are not only lived in material, daily interactions but are also imagined, multiple, and mobile. The difficulties with such enclosed, "spatialized" localities are that they obscure the lived realities faced by any transnational person' (p. 20). If 'the spatial bottle of locality' is not a concept with which you are familiar, or if you have trouble distinguishing a 'transnational person' from a 'national' one, Carter's book is likely to be frustrating.

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Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. xvi + 352, \$65.00, \$22.50 pb.

Dennis Merrill has written an informative account of the United States' relationships within its 'hemisphere of influence', Latin America, in which he inserts into the historical record of its 'hard power' – gunboat diplomacy, empire building and hegemonic penetrations – the role(s) and 'reach' of tourism's 'soft power' in the form of successive waves of tourists and their 'facilitators' – that is, hoteliers, travel agencies and such. This focus on the unusual marriage of these very different influential 'penetrations' of 'Americans' in their southern-hemisphere extension of Latin America is not only refreshing but illuminating. Undertaking both a cultural and historical examination of international tourism and international relations,